Liberal Internationalism
Written by Miriam Dornan

Liberal Internationalism

There are many theories associated with international relations. This essay aims to discuss the ways in which liberal internationalism provides a more convincing account of international relations than class based approaches. It will provide an outline of liberal internationalism's key aims and successes in comparison to class based approaches such as the Gramscian-Marxist approach.

Before discussing whether or not liberal internationalism is more convincing than its class based competitors, it is important to define what is meant by liberal internationalism. The concept of liberal internationalism is often associated with former US President Woodrow Wilson, thus sometimes being referred to as 'Wilsonianism' (Hoffman, 1995: pg 159). Wilson suggested that the cause of instability and conflict was the "undemocratic nature of international politics", particularly in regards to foreign policy and the balance of power (Baylis et al. 2008: pg 111). Having identified the cause of conflict, it is possible to suggest that the aims of liberal internationalism are expanding democratic practices and free trade, defending democracy from its rivals while protecting and promoting human rights (Hoffman, 1995: pg 159).

This idea of how the world ought to develop appears to have been inspired in part by Immanuel Kant's 'Perpetual Peace'. It can be argued that Kant was advocating a "federation of free states governed by the rule of law" (Steans & Pettiford, 2001: pg 45). Kant suggested that when states became republics and their citizens are given the opportunity to make decisions, they are less likely to choose to go to war, therefore it is possible to argue that as more states become republics and democracy spreads then the likelihood of war between nations becomes smaller until eventually all nations view war as irrational and peace triumphs over conflict (Kant, 1795; (Baylis et al. 2008). The pursuit of perpetual peace seems to be a key aspect of liberal internationalism. To summarise, liberal internationalism can be defined as an approach to international relations aiming to spread liberal democracy throughout the world in order to bring an end to conflicts.

Having defined liberal internationalism, it may be useful to outline the class-based approaches to international relations, which will be used to examine how convincing the liberal internationalist approach is. While liberal internationalism identifies states as the key actor, Marxist thought would argue that social class is the most significant actor (Heywood, 2004). Marxists tend to argue that society, domestically and internationally, is "systematically prone to class conflict", whereas liberals assume an "essential harmony of interests" among the various social groups (Baylis et al. 2008: pg 146). As previously mentioned, liberal internationalism seeks to expand, defend and promote democracy across the globe in order to maintain stability and peace, Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci would argue that this stability is maintained through the concept of hegemony. Gramsci highlights the significance of ideology in maintaining class rule and suggests that the ruling classes legitimise their power and preserve the status quo presenting their ideas as the only feasible option (Steans & Pettiford, 2001). This suggests that ruling elites can gain consent for their ideas but crucially, according to Gramsci, their legitimacy is not threatened due to a fear of coercion felt by the "exploited and alienated" classes (Baylis et al. 2008: pg 150). It may be possible to argue from a Gramscian point of view that leading powers in the international system have developed a world order suited to their interests and goals, convinced the lower classes that this world order is also in their interests yet continue to exploit them (Baylis et al. 2008). Summed up, class based approaches to international relations do not view states as the most important actors in the international system, with the Gramscian school of thought arguing that ruling classes manipulate the majority of society into the belief that there is only one world order that will produce

Liberal Internationalism
Written by Miriam Dornan

peace and stability.

Having presented an outline of liberal internationalism and class based approaches to international relations, it is now possible to examine whether or not liberal internationalism offers a more convincing account of international relations than its class based counterparts.

Liberal internationalism may be viewed as a convincing approach to international relations as it is possible to argue that this approach has been relatively successful in creating and sustaining stability. Taking each of liberal internationalism's key aims, as outlined previously, it is possible to assess how much success has been gained through this approach to international relations.

Firstly, liberal internationalism is praised for speaking up against violations of human rights (Hoffman, 1995). Combating human rights violations may be achieved through the use of various international institutions, which have liberal internationalist ideals embedded in their constitutions; examples of such institutions would be the United Nations (UN), European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), (Goldstein et al. 2000). Such institutions give citizens the opportunity to stand up to what Marxists might term the ruling class, an example of this could be the *Siliadin v. France* case submitted to the European Court of Human Rights in 2001 (European Court of Human Rights, 2008). This case claimed that French law was "inadequate in preventing 'domestic slavery'", thus committing a violation of ECHR's Article 4, the "prohibition of slavery and forced labour" (European Court of Human Rights, 2008).

This would appear to illustrate that the international institutions put in place to protect the aims of liberal internationalism are fulfilling their goal, however it could be argued that there have been times when promoters of liberal internationalism have been silent on certain human rights violations in order to pursue other objectives. An example of this would be the way in which liberal internationalist leader, America, appeared to ignore the human rights violations occurring in China in order to use the Chinese to help in the fight against the Soviet form of communism (Hoffman, 1995). It is possible then to suggest that Gramscianism trend of thought was correct in assuming that leaders in the international system will pursue their own interests at the expense of others being exploited, also choosing to pursue particular interests at particular points in time.

It is possible to suggest that the protection of human rights comes only when the values of democracy have been accepted. Attention is now turned to liberal internationalism's success in achieving the spread of democratic values, assessing whether or not this approach to international relations is convincing in its attempt to secure global stability. It may be suggested that democracy is the "antidote that will prevent future wars" (Layne, 1994: pg 5). Democratic peace theorists appear to argue that democratic states are "no less war-prone than non-democratic states" but generally choose not to engage in war with other democratic states the relationships between democratic states are built on mutual respect, cooperation and interdependence (Layne, 1994: pg 8). The assumption could then be made that as democracy expands, the tendency to engage in military conflict reduces.

Although this appears to be a convincing way to promote international peace and stability, questions have been asked as to how democracy is spread. It appears that one way in which liberal internationalists spread democracy is through intervening in non-democratic states to replace the governing regime with an alternative democratic one, an example of this would be US and coalition forces involvement in Afghanistan to replace the Islamic Taliban regime with a democratic government. It could be argued that this intervention has been partly successful in that August 2009 saw the first Afghan run elections since international involvement in 2001 illustrating that not only has the undemocratic regime been removed from power but that Afghanistan is capable of holding its own democratic elections (Doucet, 2009). However these elections have come under much criticism and campaigning for a second round is underway following a recount of the initial votes due to claims of fraud (BBC News, 2009). In addition to criticism surrounding the presidential elections, it is possible to suggest that intervention in Afghanistan has not achieved its goal of spreading democracy and peace as the death toll of both military personnel and civilians in the region continues to rise. One figure suggests that there were upwards of 3,000 people killed in violence during 2008 alone (USA Today, 2008). Evidence such as this would appear to demonstrate that when liberal international powers intervene they succeed in promoting democratic reform in the short term but in the long run end up delivering unstable situations (Bueno de Mesquita & Downs, 2006). This appears to suggest that the practice of interventionism

Liberal Internationalism

Written by Miriam Dornan

is only part of a wider attempt to expand democracy, therefore only being part of the examination of liberal internationalism's success.

Linked to the previous analysis of spreading democracy in order to ensure international peace and stability, it is possible to argue that liberal internationalism is a convincing approach to international relations because the number of liberal democracies has risen throughout the 20th century. Huntington identified three 'waves' of democratization, that is periods of time where the number of states establishing themselves as democracies outnumbered the number of states experiencing democratic breakdown (Diamond, 1996). Diamond suggests that the there is between 76 and 117 democracies now operating (ibid.). Although data may show the number of democracies is increasing, has the spread of democracy reduced the number of conflicts thus achieving the liberal internationalist aim of promoting democracy to help ensure stability? In support of liberal internationalism's approach to international relations would be that along with the increased number of democratic states, there has been no violent conflict on the scale on the two world wars.

However, there has continued to be international conflict, notably the 'War on Terror'. Supporters of class-based approaches would perhaps argue that focus should not be placed on conflict between states but rather on the conflicts arising out of class tensions. Drawing on the earlier relationship between the spread of democracy and intervention, advocates of class-based approaches to international relations, particularly those who concerned with the World Systems Theory, appear to suggest that intervening in order to expand democratic practices is merely a way of legitimizing the hegemonic imperialism of liberal internationalist powers (Baylis et al. 2008). It is thus possible to argue that the US and its allies are not engaged in the 'War on Terror' in order to pursue democracy and peace but rather to enforce their own beliefs on seemingly unwilling states while demonstrating their coercive powers in order to keep those on the periphery from becoming part of the core unless they sign up completely to the aims of those already part of the core. In support of this argument would be the idea that if the states or institutions intervening were truly democratic then they would be peaceful in all relations, whether with fellow democracies or not, pursuing negotiations and peaceful resolutions rather than engaging in violent, military conflict (Layne, 1994).

Although the liberal international approach appears to have been relatively successful in achieving its aim of protecting human rights and spreading democratic practices, it is perhaps possible to argue that this is a more convincing approach to international relations than class-based approaches due to the influence of free trade economics. Gramscian scholars would argue that free trade hinders the economic and social development of those on the periphery (Baylis et al. 2008). However those in support of liberal internationalism would counter this claim by suggesting that free trade creates interdependence between states suggesting that is to everyone's benefit to have open markets as it rests upon the assumption that transactions between states will be "determined by prices rather than coercion" thus producing a "mutual security" (Doyle, 1986: pg. 1161).

In conclusion, liberal internationalism can be seen as a more convincing approach to international relations than its class-based rivals as not only has it experienced success in reaching its aims to spreading democracy, protecting human rights and promoting economic free trade in order to maintain peace, it has also continued to be a dominant force in international relations while class-based approaches have failed to make any lasting and significant impact (Doyle, 1986). However it is also important to note that liberal internationalism is not without its internal faults and has appeared to value certain aims over others at various points in history.

Bibliography

Baylis. J, Smith. S, Owens. P, 2008, *The Globalization of World Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

BBC News, 2009, Campaigning for Afghan Elections, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8323708.stm Accessed: 30/10/2009

Bueno de Mesquita. B and Downs. G, 2006, 'Intervention and Democracy', *International Organisation*, 60: 3: 627-649

Diamond. L, 1996, 'Is the Third Wave Over?', *Journal of Democracy*, 7: 3: 20-37

Liberal Internationalism

Written by Miriam Dornan

Doucet. L, 2009, Afghanistan's Day of Reckoning, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8205787.stm Accessed: 30/10/2009

Doyle. M, 1986, 'Liberalism and World Politics', *The American Political Science Review*, 80: 4: 1151-1169

European court of Human Rights, 2008, The European Court of Human Rights: Some Facts and Figures 1998-2008, http://www.echr.coe.int/NR/rdonlyres/ACF07093-1937-49AF-8BE6-36FE0FEE1759/0/FactsAndFiguresENG10ansNov.pdf Accessed: 31/10/2009

Goldstein. J, Kahler. M, Keohane. R, Slaughter. A, 2000, 'Introduction: Legalization and World Politics,*International Organisation*, 54: 3: 385-399

Heywood. A, 2004, *Political Theory: An Introduction*, Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire

Hoffman. S, 1995, 'The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism', *Foreign Policy*, 98: 159-177.

Kant. I, 1795 (2005), *Perpetual Peace*, Cosimo Inc., New York

Layne. C, 1994, 'Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace', *International Security*, 19: 2: 5-49

Steans. J. and Pettiford. L, 2001, *International Relations: Perspectives and Themes*, Pearson Education Limited, Essex

USA Today, 2008, Afghan Death Toll Reaches 500, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-08-07-afghan-war_N.htm Accessed: 31/10/2009

—

Written by: Miriam E Dornan

Written at: University of Strathclyde

Written for: Dr Bill Patterson

Date written: November 2009